

HPG working paper

# Germany's rise as a humanitarian donor

## The interplay of narratives, new foreign policy ambition and domestic interests

Corinna Kreidler, Sonja Hövelmann<sup>ID</sup> and Alexandra Spencer

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## About this report

This research was carried out collaboratively between HPG and CHA in Berlin, together with an independent consultant.

CHA is Germany’s first thinktank for humanitarian action. It bridges the gap between the academic analysis of humanitarian action and the practical work in projects and programmes, as well as between international discussions and the debate in Germany.

HPG’s work is directed by our Integrated Programme (IP), a multi-year body of research spanning a range of issues, countries and emergencies, allowing us to examine critical issues facing humanitarian policy and practice and influence key debates in the sector. This paper is part of HPG’s ‘People, power and agency’ IP. The authors would like to thank HPG’s IP donors whose funding enables us to pursue the research agenda.

## About the authors

ORCID numbers are given where available. Please click on the ID icon next to an author’s name in order to access their ORCID listing.

**Corinna Kreidler** has been working in humanitarian action for more than 20 years. She is a freelance consultant and an associate of Humanitarian Outcomes, working on humanitarian financing, policy and the humanitarian system.

**Sonja Hövelmann**<sup>ID</sup> is a research fellow with the Centre for Humanitarian Action in Berlin. Her previous research includes topics such as the humanitarian–development–peace nexus, humanitarian norms and German humanitarian assistance.

**Alexandra Spencer** is a Senior Research Officer with HPG at ODI. @AlexandraSp25

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# Acronyms

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|               |   |
|---------------|---|
| <b>AfD</b>    | Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany)                             |
| <b>BMZ</b>    | German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development                  |
| <b>DGECHO</b> | Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations |
| <b>EU</b>     | European Union  |
| <b>GFFO</b>   | German Federal Foreign Office   |
| <b>GNI</b>    | gross national income   |
| <b>ICRC</b>   | International Committee of the Red Cross  |
| <b>IOM</b>    | International Organization for Migration  |
| <b>NGO</b>    | non-governmental organisation   |
| <b>ODA</b>    | official development assistance   |
| <b>OECD</b>   | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development                            |
| <b>MSF</b>    | Médecins Sans Frontières  |
| <b>UN</b>     | United Nations  |
| <b>UNHCR</b>  | UN Refugee Agency   |
| <b>WFP</b>    | World Food Programme  |
| <b>WHS</b>    | World Humanitarian Summit   |

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background to the case study

The international humanitarian system is faced with ever-growing challenges of sufficiency, efficiency, effectiveness and legitimacy. Investing in generating evidence regarding the positive effects and results of humanitarian assistance is one way to address the challenges and to influence the political will to further invest in it. However, political will and beliefs by policymakers are not only influenced by evidence but also by powerful narratives emanating from governments, politicians, the media, and humanitarian organisations themselves. Understanding these narratives, how they are constructed, how they change over time and the mechanisms through which they influence policy decisions is key to making the case for humanitarian assistance. This understanding can support advocates or policymakers to explore how they can create, modify or amplify evidence-based narratives to support a greater political will for change (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1** Using evidence to create political will for change



Source: Saez and Bryant, 2023

To explore how this plays out in practice, this paper focuses on Germany as a case study country. Germany's rise to becoming the second-largest humanitarian donor is exceptional in a humanitarian system that is plagued by the perennial challenge of sufficiency, where increasing volumes of private and institutional funding cannot keep pace with rising humanitarian needs. Over the past decade, there has been a significant uptick in humanitarian assistance from the German government. The German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO) has seen an increase in its humanitarian budget from €82 million in 2011 to almost €2.6 billion in 2021 (Bundesfinanzministerium, 2023), placing Germany as the second-largest bilateral humanitarian donor.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The largest bilateral humanitarian donor is the United States (US).

Therefore, this case study was selected as an example of how humanitarians can address the challenge of insufficient humanitarian funding. It explores how narratives at play among the population, media, government and aid agencies enabled and justified the significant increase in Germany's humanitarian assistance budget. The study explores the intersection of the stories that actors construct and disseminate to justify humanitarian assistance, and the influence they have on the political will of policymakers and decision-making processes. However, humanitarian narratives do not exist in a vacuum and this paper aims to explore the interlacing factors that allowed change to happen in Germany.

### 1.2 Understanding narratives

This project defines humanitarian policy narratives as (Saez and Bryant, 2023: 12):

stories and frames constructed and deployed to shape beliefs, attitudes and ultimately decisions relating to humanitarian crises and humanitarian aid – in particular, to justify why, when and where humanitarian aid is needed, who should deliver it and how, and who should receive it.

This definition builds upon an understanding of narratives as 'stories with a purpose' (ibid.: 9) and policy narratives as 'prescriptive stories about who should do what, and how, when and why they should do it in order to address policy dilemmas' (Kaplan, 1986: 770).

Importantly, narratives have been found to be more influential if they can be related to or speak to the existing views of the intended audience (Hanusch, 2008 in Jamieson and Rivera, 2021; see also Box 1). Therefore, narratives surrounding a particular issue will likely differ amongst the different actors advocating for change and the intended target of those narratives. Once this shared perspective has been established, 'only then can audiences be receptive and persuaded, or new evidence be introduced, through the lens of existing beliefs and knowledge' (Cairney and Oliver, 2017; Cullerton et al., 2022: 2 in Saez and Bryant, 2023: 10).

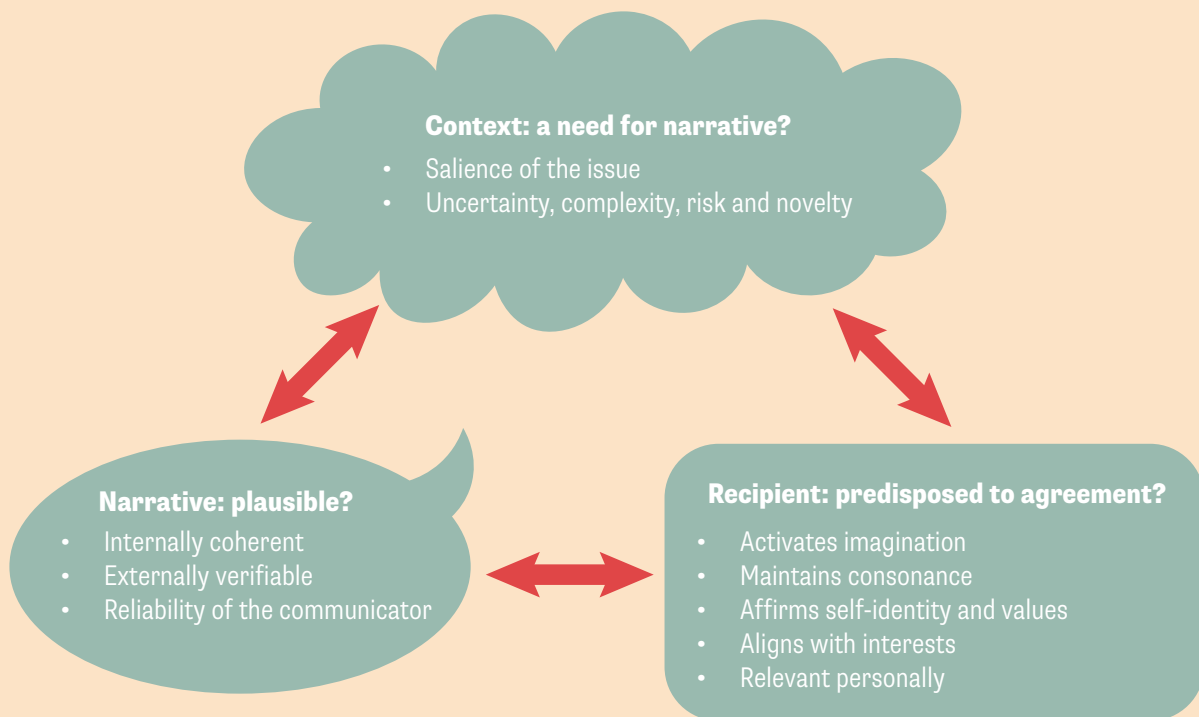
Research on the use of narratives in the humanitarian sector has predominantly focused on their utility for public fundraising. Given the nature of the humanitarian sector, as one dependent on voluntary donations from institutional and private donors, the need for and dominance of narratives of exceptionalism are clear (Saez and Bryant, 2023). Critically, crises are presented as exceptional events: as affecting helpless countries and helpless people in need of support (FundsforNGOs, 2019; Saez and Bryant, 2023). The emotional tone of these narratives creates a moral imperative to respond and to provide humanitarian assistance. However, they often create a 'particular set of representations of humanitarian crises, of people affected by them and of humanitarianism as a whole' (Saez and Bryant, 2023: 13), which risks hampering reform agendas to make the humanitarian sector more people-centred and locally led.



### Box 1 The success of policy narratives

A framework for analysing the success of policy narratives was developed by Dennison (2021). It sets out three key factors that explain the popularity of a narrative: plausibility, receptive recipients and conducive context (see Figure 2). Firstly, plausibility refers to the internal logic of the narrative and the extent to which external evidence supports it, as well as the credibility of the communicator. Secondly, receptive recipients are those who are predisposed to agreement. This is strengthened when narratives activate imagination, maintain consonance, affirm self-identity and values, and align with interests. Thirdly, narratives appear when there is a need to make sense of an issue due to its complexity, novelty, risk, uncertainty and salience.

**Figure 2** Framework for analysing the success of policy narratives



Source: Dennison (2021)

### 1.3 Objectives and methodology

This research was undertaken collaboratively by the Humanitarian Policy Group, the Centre for Humanitarian Action and an independent consultant. It is one of three case studies in a two-year project titled ‘Remaking aid: ethics, politics and narratives’, studying the use of narratives in humanitarian decision-making. This project explores how different narratives shape humanitarian decision-making and how this process can be influenced to ‘remake’ humanitarian aid so that it better services people in crises. This case study used a qualitative research methodology to answer the following question: **How have public narratives influenced the German government’s decision to significantly increase its humanitarian aid budget?**

To answer this question, the project primarily used semi-structured interviews conducted between January and March 2023. The research team interviewed 45 key informants across donor/government representatives, international organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), journalists and academia. The findings were validated through a workshop with 10 external participants.

Interviews were supplemented with a desk review of key literature including media analysis with a review of articles from five major German daily newspapers<sup>2</sup> and key policy documents. For the media analysis, 171 articles were selected from a collection of 641 articles which referenced humanitarian aid.

#### 1.3.1 Limitations

This project relied on a snowball sampling method to reach those in key decision-making positions at the time of the budgetary changes. While many important stakeholders were reached, the research lacks forensic details on how the budget is elaborated and negotiated at the highest levels of government.

Secondly, this case study did not make use of social media as part of the media analysis, instead opting for newspaper publications. Greater insight from public opinion may have been gained by analysing narratives from social media. It also did not look specifically at TV reporting as this was considered out of scope.

Thirdly, the case study analyses a timeframe between the years 2011 and 2021. In response to the Russian war in Ukraine, in February 2022 Germany’s Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced a turning point (*Zeitenwende*) in German foreign policy with major implications for defence policy, conflict engagement and, by extension, also for humanitarian assistance. These developments fall outside the 10-year timeframe, and so the analysis did not look at those changes and their effects on humanitarian narratives, public perception or governmental budget decisions.

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<sup>2</sup> Bildzeitung, Die ZEIT, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Der Spiegel and Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Criteria selection also included equal weighing for years between 2011 and 2021. All data was coded and analysed using MaxQDA.

### 1.4 Case study structure

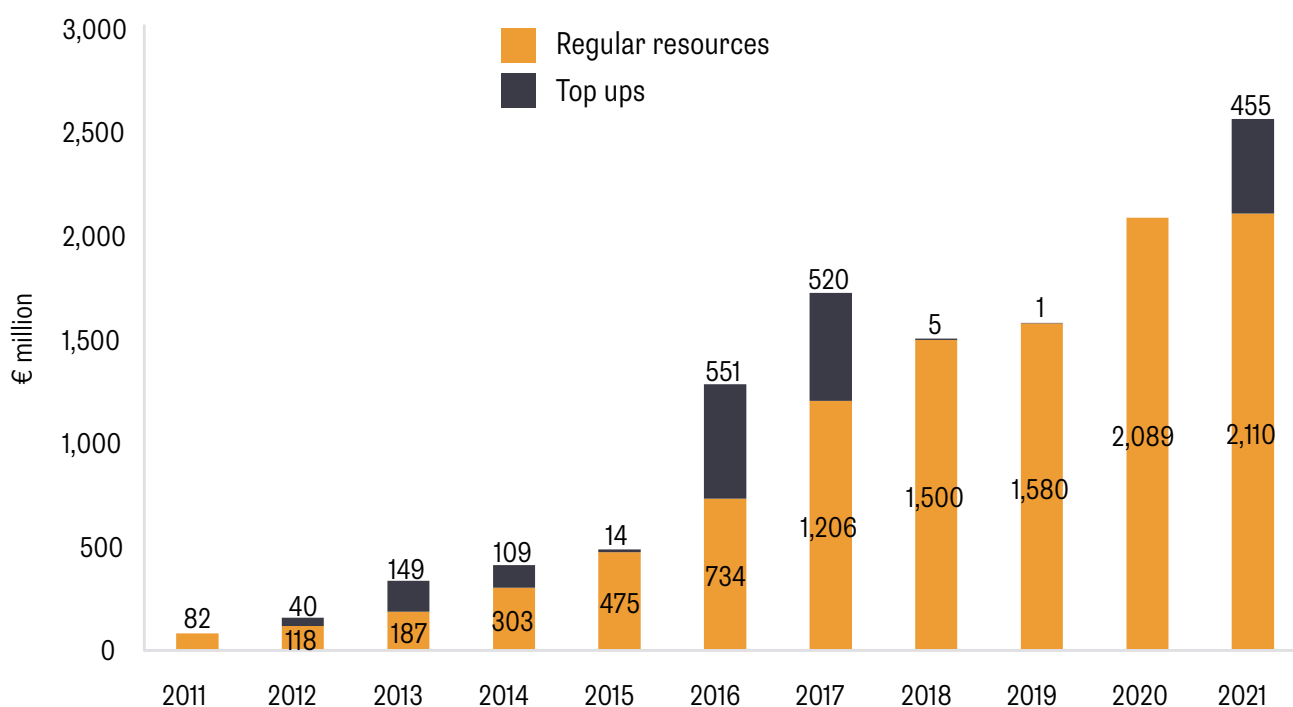
Chapter 2 describes the growth in Germany's humanitarian assistance budget before Chapter 3 explores some of the foundational and structural factors that made this growth possible. Chapters 4 and 5 analyse the external and internal humanitarian narratives at play over the 2011–2021 study period, and their interplay with the enabling environment of the German context, the approach to foreign policy, and the domestic interest in a budgetary increase. Lastly, Chapters 6 and 7 detail the lessons learned and recommendations for future influencing.

## 2 Evolution of the German humanitarian aid budget

From 2011 to 2021, the budget for international humanitarian assistance grew significantly, increasing from €82 million in 2011 to €2.6 billion in 2021, an increase of over 3,000% (Figure 3). For comparison, the overall government budget increased at the same time by only 82% (Bundesfinanzministerium, 2023).

The budget for humanitarian assistance has increased nearly every single year since 2012. Due to large mid-year top-up allocations in 2016 and 2017, 2018 was the only year in the decade that did not see an increase in the overall humanitarian spend from the previous year. Figure 3 shows the evolution of the budget line, detailing annual regular resources and top-ups.

**Figure 3** German humanitarian aid budget, 2011–2021



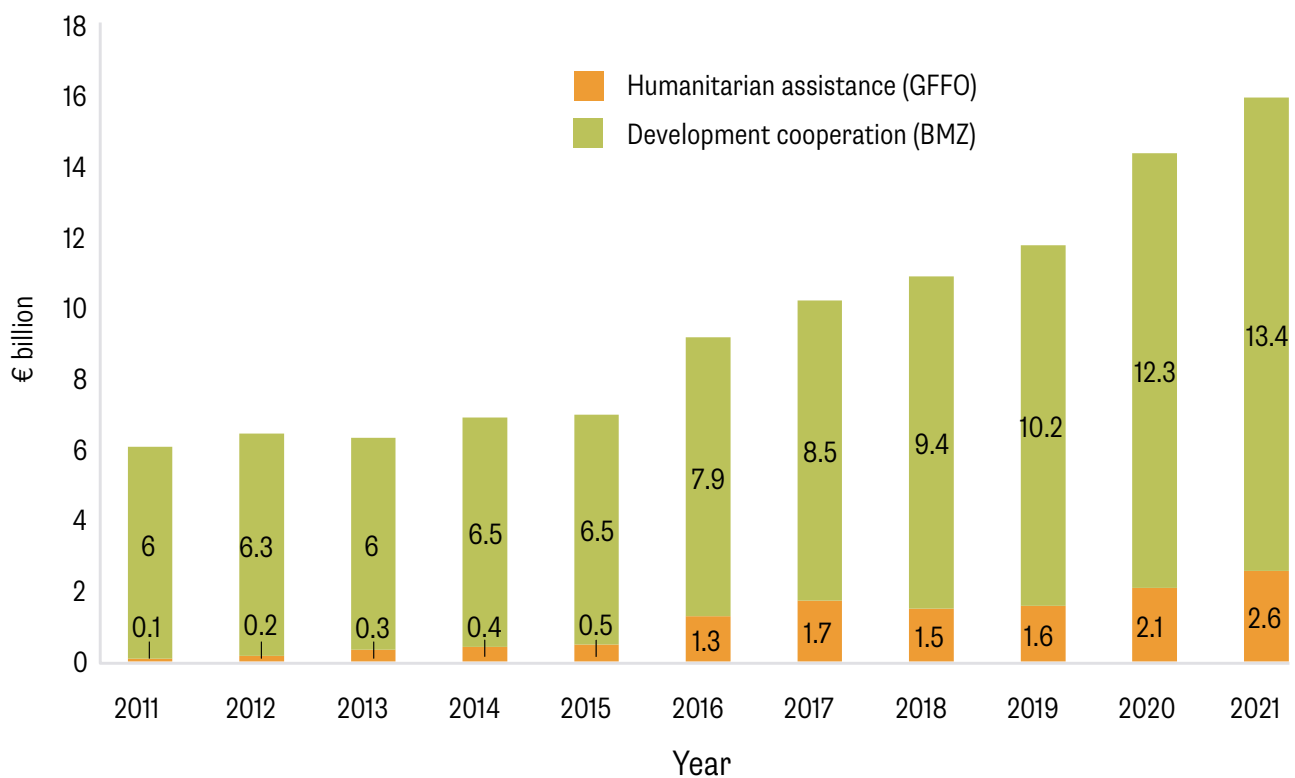
Source: Bundesfinanzministerium (2023)

Over the same period, German official development assistance (ODA) increased from €10.1 billion (0.39% of the gross national income (GNI)) to €27.6 billion (0.74%) (Bundesfinanzministerium, 2023; BMZ, n.d.a; see Figure 4). As part of this, the humanitarian budget in 2011 represented 4.5% of ODA. This was 'significantly below the average of other donors' (Weingärtner et al., 2011: xxiii), which was 9% that year for members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DARA, 2011; Development Initiatives, 2013). By 2021, Germany's

humanitarian share of ODA had increased to 9.4% (Bundesfinanzministerium, 2023; BMZ, n.d.b), but it was still lagging behind the Development Assistance Committee donor average, which had risen to 14% in the same year (Development Initiatives, 2022).

The increase in humanitarian funding did not come at the expense of development funding. Although the budget of the development ministry did not see the same dramatic increase, the budget of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) more than doubled from €6.2 billion in 2011 to €13.4 billion in 2021 (see Figure 5) (Bundesfinanzministerium, 2023).

**Figure 4** Official development assistance from Germany, 2011-2021



Source: Bundesfinanzministerium (2023)

Though private fundraising is not the key theme of this research, it is important to note that the overall amount and, more importantly, the percentage of private money donated for disaster relief and emergency assistance, have strongly increased over the studied period from 8% in 2012 (first year that figures are available) to 28% in 2021 (Corcoran, 2023).<sup>3</sup> It has become the primary cause driving individual giving in Germany (ibid.).

<sup>3</sup> The survey was conducted by GfK commissioned by the Deutscher Spendenrat.

## 3 The German context: an enabling environment

This chapter describes the key contextual factors influencing the evolution of Germany's budget for humanitarian assistance over the period 2011–2021. It starts with a broad description of humanitarianism in Germany, followed by an explanation of the government architecture for international assistance. It then explores how key events, public opinion and the way in which the German media reports on humanitarian assistance, have facilitated a more positive environment that is both much less polarised and much less polarising than in other European countries.

### 3.1 Humanitarianism in Germany

Literature documenting the history of humanitarianism and the German humanitarian culture is scarce. An analysis by Quack (2016) is one of the few studies providing an overview, concluding that there is no specific humanitarian history or tradition in Germany. He identifies a landscape of actors that is marked by heterogeneity, which is seen as an advantage – different actors have their roots in civil society or in the main faith groups, and the federal structure of the German political arena. These characteristics often allow citizens to feel a connection to an organisation. This is mirrored by disaster management agencies. When a natural disaster strikes in Germany, it is the voluntary firefighters, the volunteers of the *Technisches Hilfswerk* (the Federal Agency for Technical Relief to natural disasters and accidents) or voluntary paramedics that come to help. This shows that there is strong engagement on the part of the public.

However, the downside is that there is a fragmented NGO landscape, resulting in a large number of relatively small organisations that can be characterised as 'humanitarian-practical' rather than 'humanitarian-political' – i.e. more operational than involved in the policy debate (Quack, 2016). As a consequence, the policy debate is less developed in Germany than in other countries.

Development aid has dominated the public discourse over many decades since BMZ was created in 1961. Humanitarian assistance was for a long time perceived as a sub-section of development assistance. Even the German association of development NGOs (created in 1995) considered it that way, and only recognised humanitarian assistance as a sector in its own right in 2014, when it changed its name to the 'Association for Development Assistance and Humanitarian Aid' (*Verband Entwicklungspolitik und Humanitäre Hilfe*).

The German branches of international NGOs are a relatively new group of actors in the humanitarian sector in Germany. Whereas some date back many years, such as World Vision (established in Western Germany in 1979) and CARE (in 1980), many were created in the 1990s and 2000s (e.g. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) Germany, Oxfam Germany, Islamic Relief Germany). The latest wave of 'new arrivals' came post-Brexit when several organisations had to look for a new European Union (EU) base to

maintain their access to EU funding, or saw the growing potential to apply for GFFO funding, e.g. the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and Action Contre le Faim (ACF). However, these offices serve mainly as conduits for German funding and have limited staff working on political communication toward governmental stakeholders.

The importance of humanitarian aid as a topic of parliamentary discussions has not evolved in the same way as the budget. For the first time in 2013, the Coalition Treaty that the governing parties signed mentioned humanitarian aid and recognised its ‘increasing importance and weight’ (Koalitionsvertrag, 2013). However, on the legislative side, a focus on human rights has traditionally overshadowed the policy discourse on humanitarian aid. The related parliamentary committee, created in 1998, covers both topics but several key informants confirmed that the lion’s share of time and attention goes to human rights issues. The fact that even official parliamentary press releases use ‘human rights committee’ as the shorthand name in reference to this committee confirms this perception.<sup>4</sup>

### 3.2 Germany’s governmental structures for official international assistance

At the beginning of the last decade, there was a significant change among the institutions responsible for disaster response. Until 2011, a small task force (*Arbeitsstab*) in GFFO administered a modest budget, financing ad hoc relief activities for a maximum of six months, primarily for natural disasters. At the same time, BMZ financed slightly longer-term recovery and post-conflict activities through a budget line administered by the division for ‘development-oriented emergency and transitional aid’. The distinction between the responsibilities of the two ministries was not always clear and a comprehensive evaluation, conducted jointly by GFFO and BMZ in 2011, concluded that ‘German humanitarian assistance as a whole is very fragmented and compartmentalised’ (Weingärtner et al., 2011: xxiii). The evaluation recommended that these responsibilities should be combined and sit with BMZ.

Despite this recommendation, in November 2011 the government assigned the entire responsibility for humanitarian assistance to GFFO. In return, GFFO transferred responsibilities to BMZ in the areas of crisis prevention and conflict management. By concentrating the full responsibility for humanitarian assistance within only one ministry, the government intended to strengthen its ability to respond to disasters and humanitarian crises abroad by providing more timely, effective and efficient assistance.

GFFO upgraded the task force in charge of humanitarian aid to a full division for humanitarian assistance, called VN 05.<sup>5</sup> In November 2012, the division published its first ‘Strategy of the GFFO for

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4 Quack (2016: 38–39) confirms the finding through a quantitative analysis of the topics covered and documents issued by the committee. He identified a gradual change, with humanitarian topics slowly gaining more prominence. Two key informants confirmed that this trend is ongoing.

5 VN is an acronym for *Vereinten Nationen* (United Nations).

humanitarian assistance abroad' (Auswärtiges Amt, 2012). The document states that 'humanitarian aid is an expression of ethical responsibility and international solidarity with people in need' (ibid.: 3). It lays out several key principles that German humanitarian assistance would follow:

- to be needs-based and in accordance with international standards;
- to support local actors and capacities;
- to increase preparedness;
- to strengthen international cooperation and the overall humanitarian system;
- to ensure quality;
- to make stronger use of humanitarian diplomacy.

The main objective of the division during these early years was to position humanitarian assistance as a sector within GFFO and to showcase the professionalism of the international humanitarian system internally, but also to the wider political environment. The head of the division had a clear understanding of the international humanitarian system and was aware of how far behind its peers Germany was as a humanitarian donor. Key informants described her as a leader with a distinct vision for where Germany should be heading in terms of quantity and quality of funding, defending a principled approach to humanitarian aid as valuable and effective. She was able to draw on an enabling environment that is further described in Section 4.1.

In 2014, GFFO conducted a substantial review process of foreign policy, discussing and defining Germany's position in a changing global world. The review led to the creation of Department S (Crisis Prevention, Stabilisation, Peacebuilding and Humanitarian Assistance), aiming to bundle 'political crisis capabilities and instruments [...] in a dedicated department that will optimise crisis management in a comprehensive foreign policy sense' (Auswärtiges Amt, 2015: 44).<sup>6</sup> Humanitarian assistance was initially placed in Department S as a single division,<sup>7</sup> reflecting the fact that the review identified it as an instrument of foreign policy, an evolution that is further analysed in Section 4.2.

In 2019, GFFO published a revised strategy for the period 2019–2023 (GFFO, 2019). The document reflects how well-established humanitarian assistance had become within the ministry, now being described as an 'integral component of Germany's foreign policy' (ibid.: 13). The document stipulates that humanitarian assistance is an expression of ethical responsibility and international solidarity, and aims to define 'how Germany will develop its profile as a principled humanitarian donor' (ibid.: 6).

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6 'Künftig werden unsere politischen Krisenfähigkeiten und Instrumente in einer eigenen Abteilung gebündelt, die den Umgang mit Krisen in einem umfassenden außenpolitischen Sinne optimiert'.

7 Due to increasing staff, the division was further sub-divided in 2016 and 2020. One in charge of thematic policies, the international humanitarian system and multinational agencies. And one to oversee responsibility for the humanitarian principles, international disaster management and humanitarian demining. A third division was added in 2022.



Throughout these years, BMZ continued to administer a budget line focusing on early-recovery activities, mostly with regards to post-conflict reconstruction of infrastructure, but also financing support to the return and reintegration of forcibly displaced populations. Since 2014, there have been two ‘special initiatives’ that have provided additional resources for supporting disaster-affected populations: first, ‘One world without hunger’ and second, ‘Tackle the causes of flight – (re)integrating refugees’.

### 3.3 Key events in the humanitarian sector influencing Germany’s trajectory

Many key informants identified the Syria crisis (2011–present) as the single most significant international crisis influencing many of these developments. Due to its geopolitical importance, this conflict put humanitarian assistance prominently on Germany’s foreign policy agenda: it featured on Germany’s agenda during its G7 presidency in 2015 and Germany has (co-)hosted Syria-related pledging conferences with increasingly senior political attendance. At the London conference, Chancellor Angela Merkel herself pledged €2.3 billion (Supporting Syria & the Region, 2016). Two key informants mentioned the conference specifically as the ‘breakthrough moment’ of humanitarian assistance within German foreign policy. Similarly, in 2017, Germany co-hosted the first Lake Chad Conference in Oslo, attended by the foreign minister at the time, who was seen as the first foreign minister who took a strong personal interest in humanitarian aid.

Interviewees also cited the World Humanitarian Summit as a key event in shaping Germany as a humanitarian donor. Notably, Chancellor Merkel attended the World Humanitarian Summit 2016 in Istanbul in person, one of the few heads of state, signalling Germany’s commitment to the international agenda. The preparations for the summit as well as the work on the Grand Bargain workstreams that followed the summit were identified as key conduits for the continued professionalisation of the ways the two divisions worked, and for gaining a more prominent voice in various donor forums. Among the topics discussed were key concerns such as providing more flexible funding, pursuing the localisation of aid, and the linkages with development aid, and these were even included in consecutive coalition treaties signed in 2018<sup>8</sup> and 2021.<sup>9</sup>

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8 ‘We will coordinate humanitarian aid more strongly and efficiently with the tasks of crisis prevention, stabilisation, disaster risk reduction and peacebuilding and, in implementation of the resolutions of the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, link them more closely with transitional development cooperation.’ (‘Wir werden die humanitäre Hilfe stärker und effizienter mit den Aufgaben der Krisenprävention, der Stabilisierung, der Katastrophenrisikovorsorge sowie der Friedensförderung abstimmen und in Umsetzung der Beschlüsse des Humanitären Weltgipfels 2016 stärker mit der strukturbildenden Entwicklungszusammenarbeit vernetzen.’) (Koalitionsvertrag, 2018: 156.)

9 ‘We are committed to the goals of the Humanitarian Development Peace Nexus and the Grand Bargain and will play a committed and active role in their implementation and ongoing development. We will disburse every third euro there as flexible funds and further expand localisation.’ (‘Wir sind den Zielen des Humanitarian Development Peace Nexus und des Grand Bargain verpflichtet und werden an deren Umsetzung und fortwährender Weiterentwicklung engagiert und aktiv mitwirken. Wir werden dort jeden dritten Euro als flexible Mittel auszahlen und die Lokalisierung weiter ausbauen.’) (Koalitionsvertrag, 2021: 147.)

### 3.4 Public opinion and media coverage of humanitarian aid

Polls show that the German public is generally in favour of international aid. Although support is weakening, there is still less public polarisation over the topic of international assistance than can be observed in other European countries. In 2018, 93% of the surveyed population in Germany considered it important ‘to help people in developing countries’ (Focus2030, 2019). Relatedly, in January 2020, 68% of those surveyed supported current or higher aid expenditure levels; by January 2023 this had fallen to 59% (Morini, 2023). This is lower than the public support surveyed in France (61%) but significantly higher than the support in the United Kingdom (UK) (48%) (ibid.). There is a small but visible geographic variation: in the eastern part of the country, that performs more poorly economically than the western federal states, only 52% support development aid. And the older generation stands out as a stronger supporter than younger people.<sup>10</sup>

Media outlets are key actors influencing public opinion. It is important to note that the German media scene differs substantially from that in other countries, especially the anglophone world. Germans mostly read local and regional newspapers.<sup>11</sup> There is only one newspaper, a tabloid called Bildzeitung, which still has substantial (though decreasing) national coverage, and can be located on the right of the political spectrum. At the centre-left there are several daily newspapers and two weeklies, Der Spiegel and Die ZEIT.

Overall, key informants labelled the press coverage of humanitarian aid as ‘friendly-disinterested’; one key informant said, ‘When you cover aid efforts you behave similar to seeing an undertaker, you show respect.’ The overarching media narrative is a rather simplistic one of ‘do-gooding.’ With occasional exceptions, there is neither a strong critical discourse on aid effectiveness (at least for humanitarian assistance) nor investigative or destructive campaigns against aid programmes, as can be seen, for example, in the UK.

The media report almost solely on large-scale, sudden-onset disasters, showing the high level of need and the urgency to assist, and reporting on pledges made by the government. Within a few days, the topic disappears from the front pages and very little, if any, coverage follows. The journalists interviewed for this research said that it has become increasingly difficult to place stories about humanitarian assistance or development aid in their news outlets, confirming the very limited attention paid to the subject. The further away from Germany a disaster happens, the more difficult it becomes to feature it in the news. The media analysis demonstrated that there were very few articles offering a conceptual critique of international humanitarian policy and very little reporting on strategic ambitions related to Germany’s aid policies.

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10 This finding is confirmed by another survey conducted specifically on development aid for Africa: 61% of the population over 65 years thought it was right to support African countries compared to only 28% of people aged between 18 and 29 (survey conducted by Civey on behalf of Table.Media; Schutte, 2023).

11 As of early 2023, Germany has 307 local or regional newspapers. In the first quarter of 2023, 81.1% of all daily newspapers sold were local or regional ones (Die Zeitungen, 2023).

The media analysis supports findings from the key interviews. Reporting on political or humanitarian crises is frequently simplistic and often depicts populations as innocent victims of rogue regimes. Calls to action are often for donations to aid organisations, rather than for political engagement. The distinction between development cooperation and humanitarian assistance is often blurred. Politicians rarely clearly distinguish the forms of assistance when they are quoted in media articles. Additionally, during the timespan analysed humanitarian engagement frequently appears as an aside in articles about ‘hard politics’, such as delivering weapons to Kurdish people in Iraq in the fight against the Islamic State (or ISIS), engagement in a robust military engagement in Mali, or Germany’s abstention in the United Nations Security Council resolution on Libya in 2011.

The media analysis showed that between 2013 and 2021, the development minister was the one mainly using humanitarian assistance strategically for public relations, rather than the Foreign Ministry. Despite not overseeing the portfolio, he understood the effectiveness of this assistance as a public-facing issue. That said, key informants also credit him with a principled and ethically motivated approach to development assistance, and as standing out in his party due to this (the Christian Social Union in Bavaria).

A few key informants mentioned that on social media they see voices calling for less aid and more support at home, which was reiterated in the survey by the Development Lab: 57% of the respondents said that more development funding should be spent domestically (Oh et al., 2022). But it is difficult to judge to what extent this is also true for humanitarian aid and whether this is a growing trend, as no tracking of this opinion over time could be found, and due also to a possible bias in the interview sample.

## 4 Global-facing narratives on Germany's foreign policy role

The following chapter explores the narratives that are used to describe the role Germany currently wants to play in the world, including as a humanitarian donor. The three key narratives explained here are:

- A narrative of humanity and solidarity with victims of disasters, especially in major emergencies but also in other crisis situations. This is a narrative that is widespread among the public, reinforced by media coverage about large-scale emergencies, and perpetuated by GFFO and all main aid actors.
- A narrative describing Germany's self-perceived global role and the way it is shaping its foreign policy – assuming global responsibility but also defending its interests. This is a narrative that the government uses in particular to describe its foreign policy, summarised in the slogan 'foreign policy with means'.
- A narrative around Germany's humanitarian donorship ambitions, how it aims to evolve its role from being a major payer to being an important player.

All three narratives fed into the political will to increase the budget, either directly or indirectly. The first one was widespread across interviews, in official documents, media articles and confirmed by public opinion polls. The second narrative is prominently used within 'informed circles' of government, foreign policy think tanks, and parliamentary discussions, and commented upon – but not communicated directly – by NGOs. The third narrative is more 'niche', and tends only to be discussed and promoted among GFFO staff, humanitarian professionals, and organisations – UN and NGOs – directly working on humanitarian assistance.

The following sections look at these three narratives and their function in more detail.

### 4.1 The narrative of humanity and solidarity with victims of disasters

There is strong public and government sentiment – and an accompanying narrative – that helping victims of disasters is important and the right thing to do. Media coverage echoes this approach to humanitarian assistance, NGOs multiply it – as part of their fundraising activities – and it is also reflected in GFFO's self-understanding as a humanitarian donor that upholds humanitarian principles, first and foremost the principle of humanity.

GFFO staff described a principled and needs-based approach as their defence against attempts to instrumentalise the budget lines for humanitarian assistance for other, more politically driven purposes. They see themselves as successful in upholding humanitarian principles as described in GFFO's humanitarian policy, and as strongly endorsed by the divisions in charge. However, key informants who do not work for GFFO sometimes questioned whether this narrative is followed in practice when the

budget has to be split across different crisis contexts. One key informant called for a more nuanced analysis, separating normative principles from operational ones, like the approach followed by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Multiple key informants identified strong public support for this principled approach (confirmed by the opinion polls cited in Chapter 3), which is mainly based on solidarity and a moral feeling of having to assist, especially when women and children are affected. One reason for this widespread public consent is the high number of German charities that are well recognised and supported by German civil society. One former member of parliament went as far as to say that ‘being fundamentally opposed to humanitarian aid is simply not appropriate in Germany’. When people hear about or see a massive humanitarian crisis unfolding, governmental announcement of financial support to victims can serve a soothing function as the public feels that ‘someone is taking care of the affected people’ (see further detail below in sub-section 5.2.3 on this emotional function of narratives). This is very different from development aid which faces stronger attacks, especially from the right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). Key informants saw the media reporting of highly visible natural disasters, especially photography in newspapers and TV coverage, as the most influential tool in generating political will to increase budget allocations for humanitarian aid.

The foundational moral narrative of altruism and solidarity was identified as a solid foundation on which requests for a stronger engagement in global crises and the calls to increase related budget lines could be based. GFFO staff reported that it was immensely helpful to be able to refer to a large public consensus of solidarity when they lobbied for additional resources, especially during the earlier years of the period under consideration. They also identified the visits of ‘humanitarian VIPs’, i.e. personalities such as the president of the ICRC, the executive director of the World Food Programme (WFP) or the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, as highly effective in influencing political decision-makers. The cross-bench agreement on the narrative that humanitarian aid is a morally justified good thing supported the increasing budget allocations as well. One key informant said:

No politician would have wanted to be seen as blocking assistance to victims of a disaster and going against the solidarity narrative, nor would have been ready to publicly defend a reduction of it.

However, as highlighted by one key informant, the narrative of humanity and thus a conducive environment had been in existence for many years before and had not led to a stronger engagement from the German government as a humanitarian donor prior to 2011. Ignition elements were needed to spark the budget increase.

The research found two such elements. First, the Arab Spring and particularly the Syria crisis occurred much closer to home than earlier crises – such as in the Horn of Africa, for example – and set in motion a flow of refugees who, in 2015, stood on Germany’s doorstep. The second spark was the personalities in charge in GFFO, especially in the period 2011–2015 but also beyond. They intended to demonstrate to

the senior management within the ministry and concerned politicians that increasing the humanitarian budget was both a moral responsibility and an effective way of showing that Germany was ready to take more responsibility in global affairs.

### 4.2 The narrative of Germany's global responsibility

This vision to position humanitarian aid much more prominently on Germany's foreign policy agenda followed in the wake of a general shift in the public debate on Germany's global role (Deutschlands Rolle in der Welt), with a growing understanding that it was time to find a new balance between its economic weight and economic gains, a balance between its strong export-oriented economy on the one hand and carrying some of the burden of global crisis management on the other.

Across many of the interviews, respondents made a particular reference to the country's responsibility as an economically prosperous nation (Reichtum verpflichtet, translated as 'wealth obliges'). Using the country's economic power as a key means for foreign policy – instead of military force – is a longstanding topic in Germany. The cheque book has been one of the principal modalities of its international politics, and one that has worked for the country over several decades.<sup>12</sup>

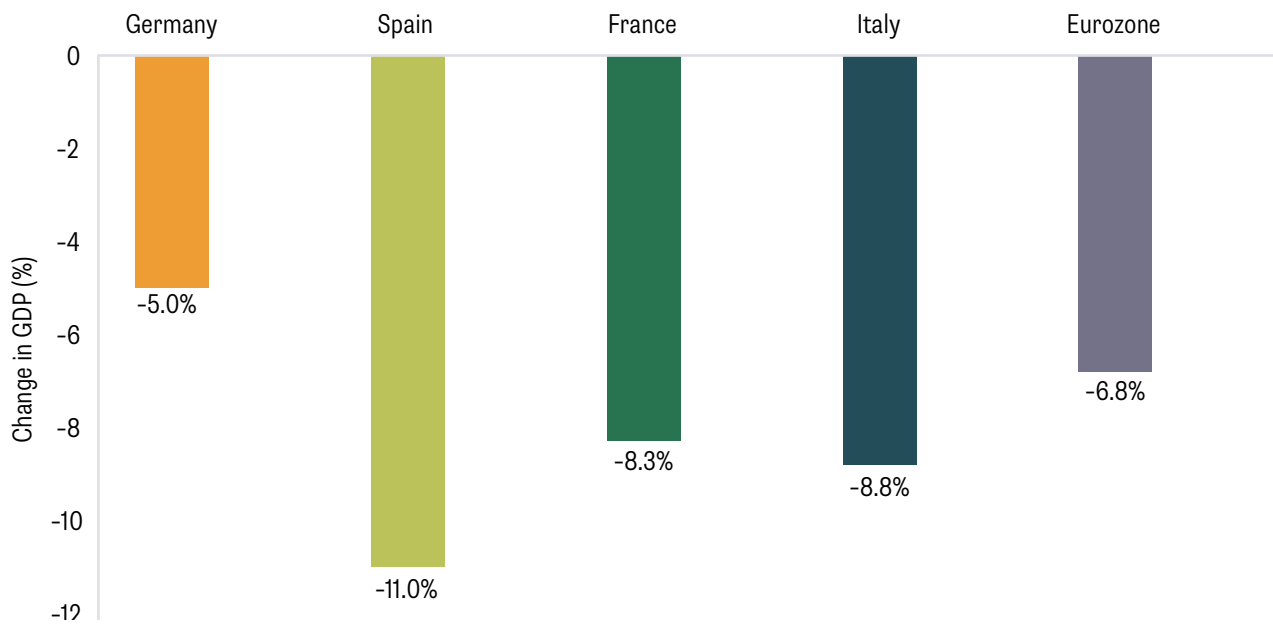
The overall economic and political context in Germany over the period under review can be described as conducive to an increased engagement in international humanitarian action, in particular during the early years researched. The years before the Covid-19 pandemic marked a period of economic prosperity, and the German economy suffered less from the impacts of the pandemic than other European countries (Figure 5).

Over time, the gross domestic product (GDP) rose from €2.7 trillion in 2011 to €3.6 trillion in 2021 (an increase of 33.7%) (Statista, 2023) and the federal budget rose from €306 billion in 2011 to €573 billion in 2021 (an increase of 87.3%) (Bundesfinanzministerium, 2023). This was mainly because of a rise in public income due to good economic performance and historically low interest rates for the public debt service, which allowed for a lot of 'spare' resources in the budget.<sup>13</sup> Because of a bold decision to take on additional debt, Germany's budget increased extensively even during the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, there was less pressure to reduce government spending and use development or humanitarian funds to cover other purposes.

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12 One key informant pointed out that a high ODA budget could be used as a reason for missing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)'s 2% target for the defence budget.

13 In 2012, the federal government had to spend 10.4% of its entire budget on debt services; this percentage decreased continuously over the research period reaching a record low rate of 2.7% in 2021 (Bundesfinanzministerium, 2023).

**Figure 5** Gross domestic product of the four largest countries in the Eurozone, 2020

Source: ECFIN, 2021

For historical reasons, Germany refrained from engaging militarily in conflict settings until the mid-2010s and compensated this lack of hard power engagement with money, for example, paying for peacekeeping missions or investing in development assistance, but not significantly in humanitarian aid.<sup>14</sup> In 2011, as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, Germany abstained from the vote on the application of the Responsibility to Protect commitment in Libya.<sup>15</sup> This was met with a lot of incomprehension by its traditional allies, who were increasingly using a more interventionist approach under this political commitment, and it served as a wake-up call to look for an alternative approach to mere economic support. But the general public strongly supported the non-military stance: 86% of the citizens interviewed as part of the 2014 strategic foreign policy review process explicitly wanted Germany to become more strongly engaged in humanitarian aid, whereas only 13% supported military interventions by the Bundeswehr (German Armed Forces) (Auswärtiges Amt, 2015: 26).

Several key informants identified the Arab Spring as the turning point for the realisation that buying one's way out no longer sufficed. This crisis occurred in Europe's neighbourhood, very close to a key ally (Israel), and threatened to destabilise an entire region. The option of military engagement was still met with serious scepticism, hence there was a question of what else could be done. This was one key element of the strategic review of foreign policy conducted in 2014.

14 For example, Germany abstained from the United States-led coalition invasion of Iraq in 2003.

15 Germany committed to the Responsibility to Protect only in 2017 when it declared the prevention of genocide and crimes against humanity to be of national interest (Genocide Alert, 2020).

A key theme resulting from this review – and a prominent narrative in many interviews – was the slogan ‘foreign policy with means’ (Außenpolitik mit Mitteln). This expression summarises a foreign policy approach that uses resources – mostly money but also other measures such as technical assistance – to achieve foreign policy objectives. To reinforce this ambition, the newly created department in GFFO needed budgetary allocations to put strategy into practice. As one senior key informant put it, ‘we wanted a foreign policy that also has tools (and not only writes strategy documents)’; another interviewee identified an ambition in the ministry to create ‘its own operational environment’.

As part of this policy shift, GFFO started seeing humanitarian assistance as a crisis-management instrument that provides value for money and soft power (at least in the short term), and shows that Germany is ‘doing something’. This was brought forward by the then humanitarian division head and her deputy, who were credited by interview partners as having ‘pulled humanitarian assistance out of its niche position’ within German foreign policy, pursuing ‘not charitable but conceptual’ objectives, presenting a clear strategy and being sufficiently tenacious to set the stage for increasing the profile of, and funding for, humanitarian assistance.

The liberation of Mosul from ISIS was referenced by interviewees as an example of a time when Germany refrained from being a member of the military coalition on the ground. Instead, it contributed a substantial share of the humanitarian budget necessary to support the hundreds of thousands of civilians displaced by the military offensive. One government representative summarised this by saying that ‘humanitarian aid is not the solution but it is a contribution to a political approach to crisis management’. Additionally, one key informant from the ministry summed up this overall development as leading to a ‘base narrative’ that ‘it is proper for a credible, reliable international partner to provide substantial humanitarian assistance as a contribution to international burden-sharing and necessary to continue doing so in the long term.’

The conducive economic situation underpinned this new policy approach by providing excess budgetary resources, particularly in the second half of a financial year, where excess budget needed to be spent and humanitarian aid was seen as a worthy cause. Earmarked top-up allocations for specific emergencies could be relatively easily obtained; the additional need could be justified by an unforeseen increase in humanitarian needs – often, but not always, caused by a natural disaster. And in the following financial year, the topped-up budget of the preceding year became the measuring stick that was applied, leading to an expectation that the level of the previous year should be reached.

With these substantial budget increases, Germany took the rank of second-largest humanitarian donor in 2017, and this fact turned into a narrative in its own right, albeit only used and discussed within a small circle of humanitarian professionals and political stakeholders.

### **4.3 The narrative of being the second-largest donor and a ‘payer and player’**

That Germany has become the second-largest humanitarian donor is both a fact and part of a narrative. Reaching a steadily high budget level was seen as a stark success by many key informants and several



were of the impression that this rank is held in great esteem in political circles. Within a (small) group of informed professionals and political stakeholders, this fact has turned into a narrative that is utilised to underpin increased ambitions in terms of maintaining funding levels and good humanitarian donorship, and which drives further commitment to the humanitarian policy itself. In that sense, the narrative has become self-fulfilling.

The ‘payer or player’ narrative recognises Germany’s previous position as the ‘payer’ as well as its future intentions: being the second-largest donor brings a greater expectation to be a ‘player’, i.e. to use the position to leverage policy priorities and to address identified shortcomings of the humanitarian system. Whether this is being actioned in practice remains to be seen, but it is clear that this narrative is driving some commitment to take a greater role in the international system. In 2022, Hövelmann and Südhoff found that many German humanitarian professionals perceive that GFFO is now more present in humanitarian forums – for example, in the highest steering body of the Grand Bargain, the Facilitation Group – but still falls short of setting the agenda of those forums. The study found Germany to be a moderator rather than a leader of humanitarian processes, without clear priorities on what objectives it wanted to progress through those processes.

That said, multiple key informants identified constraints in human resources as a key reason why GFFO still underperforms internationally on the policy level. Some referenced the limited staffing in GFFO compared to other major donors as a significant constraint. Hövelmann and Südhoff found that ‘Sweden employs three times as much staff per Euro/US dollar spent as Germany, the USA four times as much and DG ECHO nine times more staff’ (2022: 4). They saw a prevailing limited understanding, even within GFFO, that the programming of a humanitarian aid budget is more than grant management and thus needs more human resources within the ministry,<sup>16</sup> in addition to key allies outside the ministry.

The research found very few destructive or negative narratives about humanitarian action in the media analysis or the interviews. One rare counternarrative cited by several interviewees concerned the public and political perception of UNRWA, the UN agency for Palestinian refugees. They saw a narrative that suggests that through some of UNRWA’s activities, especially the education system, antisemitism is fuelled – for example, through the way that textbooks present Palestinian history. The narrative implies that this kind of education could lead to a direct or even indirect support of Hamas. These interviewees reported that they had to actively counter this narrative. Due to Germany’s history, any support of a perceived or openly anti-Israeli organisation is regarded as absolutely unacceptable by political stakeholders; the security of the State of Israel is considered an integral part of Germany’s national interests and the German government assures Israel of its unwavering support. Within the 2021 coalition treaty, the government supported an independent evaluation of UNRWA, speaking to the tenacity of the narrative (Koalitionsvertrag, 2021).

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<sup>16</sup> In 2021, a total of 75 posts were responsible for around 40% of the total budget (€8.05 billion) of GFFO (Hövelmann and Südhoff, 2022).

## 5 The narrative of aid preventing flight and stemming migration

While (financial) solidarity with victims of disasters abroad has been identified as a topic of large consensus in Germany, hosting refugees inside Germany is where opinions differ significantly. Until 2015 the polarisation on refugee-hosting was less obvious, but it changed dramatically with the arrival of almost 1 million refugees from Syria and its neighbouring countries. An extremely powerful narrative evolved as a reaction to this unprecedented influx of refugees, presenting international aid, including humanitarian assistance, as a tool to prevent flight and stem migration. It should be noted that whilst this is a powerful and persistent narrative, research shows that the causality between increasing aid and reducing migration has not been proven (see De Haas, 2007; Clemens and Postel, 2018; Dennison et al., 2019; Clist and Restelli, 2020; Restelli, 2020; Lucht et al., 2021; Fitchett and Wesselbaum, 2022).<sup>17</sup> In fact, there is much evidence to suggest that migration from low-income countries increases rather than decreases with development and aid.

Nevertheless, this narrative was a key driver for investing in humanitarian assistance, and it is therefore analysed in more detail than the narratives described in Chapter 4.

### 5.1 The genesis of the narrative

Until 2015, senior government officials had shown little interest in global forced displacement. This changed dramatically in 2015 and 2016 when the biggest influx of (foreign)<sup>18</sup> refugees arrived in Germany since the Second World War. Germany was suddenly confronted with a large-scale emergency at its doorstep. Approximately 1 million refugees reached the German borders and the chancellor decided, with little political consultation, not to close them. The minister of finance at the time, Wolfgang Schäuble, dubbed the moment ‘a rendezvous of our society with globalisation’ (‘ein Rendezvous unserer Gesellschaft mit der Globalisierung’) (n-tv, 2015).

Political pressure to better understand the drivers of displacement for these people and to seek solutions to the unfolding so-called ‘refugee and migrant crisis’ led politicians towards previously unheeded calls from humanitarian organisations for greater volumes of humanitarian assistance to Syria and the region. Fundraising narratives from these organisations, particularly on the reduction of food rations in refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, suggested simply that underfunding

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17 The majority of these studies refer to development aid more broadly, rather than humanitarian assistance. Reasons to migrate are more complex than the narrative suggests, and we cannot say with certainty that humanitarian aid did not affect an individual’s decision to move.

18 Hundreds of thousands of people were forcibly displaced at the end of the Second World War and arrived in Germany but these were German citizens. Even though they were also seen as outsiders, their legal situation was fundamentally different.

the Syria response was an important reason for people to move away from the region and towards Germany. This narrative permeated even the highest levels of government. Several key informants who were involved in the developments at the time confirmed that the chancellor demanded regular updates about the funding situation for the refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan and she engaged regularly with the heads of the WFP, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), bypassing the usual communication channels through the Foreign Office and thus becoming a direct recipient of these agencies' messaging.

As a result, senior government officials concluded that if reduced assistance in the camps was an element causing people to seek refuge in Europe, more international aid could prevent them leaving the camps. This becomes apparent in a quote from Merkel from 2022 (Hildebrandt and di Lorenzo 2022):<sup>19</sup>

That is why, in retrospect, I would work much earlier to prevent a situation like the one in the summer of 2015 from arising in the first place, for example by increasing contributions to the World Food Programme for refugee camps in neighbouring countries particularly affected by migration, as we did later on.

The then-health minister echoed the same statement in the same weekly newspaper on 15 June 2023, saying 'a mistake committed in 2015 was to not provide sufficient assistance in the region' (Bittner and Machowecz, 2023),<sup>20</sup> demonstrating that the narrative was bought into and promoted by politicians at the highest echelons.

## 5.2 Understanding the success of this narrative

It is important to unpack the 'aid preventing flight and stemming migration' narrative in order to explain its huge impact on German public opinion and on budgetary allocations. It shows several elements of successful storytelling: repetition, simplification and the ability to connect with diverse political beliefs (Breithaupt, 2023) and follows in an almost textbook-like fashion the factors for a narrative's popularity according to Dennison's framework for narrative success: plausibility, receptive recipients and conducive context (Dennison, 2021; see Chapter 1).

### 5.2.1 The success factors of plausibility, repetition and simplification

The first factor for success lies in a narrative's plausibility. The narrative that international assistance stems migration sounds instinctively plausible and contains an internal logic. In addition, it was frequently repeated in a relatively simplistic way that was easily understood by the wider public. The

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19 The original quote reads: 'Deshalb würde ich im Rückblick deutlich früher daran arbeiten, dass eine Situation wie im Sommer 2015 gar nicht erst entstehen muss, zum Beispiel mit einer Erhöhung der Beiträge zum World Food Programme für Flüchtlingslager in besonders von Migration betroffenen Nachbarländern, wie wir sie dann auch gemacht haben.'

20 Original quote: 'Ein Fehler, der 2015 gemacht wurde, war, in der Krisenregion nicht genug zu helfen'.

media analysis showed that between 2015 and 2017, the narrative was frequently taken up. Many articles refer to food rationing and the cuts in the UN's budget as causes of refugee movements to Europe, especially by Syrians. While articles also cite loss of prospects, depleted savings and no political solution to the conflict in Syria as triggers, the link between food rationing due to the UN's stretched budget and refugee movements was clearly established in several articles, across the spectrum of dailies (Bildzeitung, 2015a; 2015b; Behrens and von Eichhorn, 2015; Gutschker, 2015; Schäfers and Staib, 2015; Zeit Online, 2015; Alkousaa et al., 2016; Bohnet, 2016; Kanning, 2017).

The important nuance that those who made the journey were not necessarily the most vulnerable camp residents and recipients of humanitarian assistance, but those who could afford to pay for the expensive journey, was lost in the simplification of the narrative. Researchers from development think tanks also made a similar linkage in publications. A paper published by the German Development Institute in 2016 stated that 'the causes of flight include wars, political repression, terrorism, food shortages and natural disasters' and asked 'what can development policy, including humanitarian aid, do in order to combat these root causes?' (Schraven et al., 2015: 1).

Key UN agencies, the WFP in particular, rode the wave of this emerging narrative and rather than challenging it, used it to their fundraising advantage.<sup>21</sup> Some key informants even spoke of humanitarian agencies 'blackmailing' the German government. In addition, other humanitarian and political actors capitalised on this narrative, reinforcing it through continued repetition in interviews, media articles and speeches. The UNHCR issued statements in the same vein. Several times, António Guterres, then High Commissioner for Refugees, was quoted as saying that 'the cuts were the "trigger" of this summer's refugee surge' (Gutschker, 2015), establishing a clear causality between both events. Whether humanitarian actors believe the causal relationship that is implied in such narratives is not of much importance to the broader audience. One key informant pointed to the fact that it is a key nature of narratives 'that they live because they are (repeatedly) told, not because they are true'.

It is natural to dismiss a direct causal relation, because there are many reasons why people are forced to flee or voluntarily decide to leave their home countries. Key informants emphasised that the causal explanation of insufficient humanitarian assistance in refugee camps *leading to* increased migration is overly simplistic on the one hand and the inverse argument is a fallacy, which is to assume that more assistance would have *prevented* the migration (as implied by Chancellor Merkel in the quote above). It is a complex set of drivers that causes forced displacement; economic desperation in countries of origin lead to very different motivations for migration, for example. But these complex drivers are difficult to untangle and are not easily palatable.

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21 The WFP still does this. At the Munich Security Conference in 2022, the executive director David Beasley said: 'We have a ring of fire circling the earth now from the Sahel to South Sudan to Yemen, to Afghanistan, all the way around to Haiti and Central America. If we do not address the situation immediately over the next 9 months we will see famine, we will see destabilization of nations and we will see mass migration. If we don't do something we are going to pay a mighty big price.' (WFP, 2022). Also, in a publication in 2023, the WFP country director for Lebanon Dominik Heinrich made the link between financial inaction by donor states for humanitarian assistance and increased migration to Europe (Heinrich and Husein, 2023).

In recent years, multiple studies have debunked the narrative. Dreher et al. (2018) found that there is no evidence that aid reduces worldwide refugee outflows or flows to donor countries in the long term. However, they show that humanitarian assistance in the form of food assistance, shelter and medicine reduces refugee movements from humanitarian contexts for a short while only. In their analysis of asylum applications in Italy, Clist and Restelli (2020) found that ‘aid does not appear to be an effective tool for deterring either regular or irregular migration’ (p. 1305). Clemens and Postel (2018) show that there is rarely evidence that aid does substantially deter migration in the long run. Research on these linkages gained traction in the years following the influx, when the narrative had already taken off, at least in German public opinion. In fact, some of that research was conducted as a reaction to the narrative. Yet, these complex pieces of analysis rarely resonate with the wider public.

Analysis on the serial reproduction of narratives shows that repetition leads to simplification and rationality is decreased between each iteration (Breithaupt, 2023). The simple narrative of ‘if we feed them over there, they won’t come over here’ is also an easy and digestible ‘solution’ that taps into widespread charitable impulse (as described in Section 4.1) and is therefore politically attractive. It is furthermore much more suitable for public consumption in a 60-second media statement. For other humanitarian activities, the construction of an intuitive narrative was less simple. For example, the narrative surrounding the loss of the protection status of Syrian refugees in 2015, after the Lebanese government suspended refugees’ ability to register with the UNHCR, did not gain similar traction, even though this was identified as an important motive for secondary movements (UNHCR, 2016). This speaks to the use of narratives to share simple and easily digestible information, often in short sound bites, to influence opinion (see Saez and Bryant, 2023: 6).

The effect of the narrative can be seen in public opinion polls: a poll in 2017 showed that two-thirds (65%) of the German public believed that development assistance can reduce the number of refugees (GPI, 2017). The figure decreased over the following years, which is in line with the fact that the narrative lost prominence in the media, though it never disappeared completely. When the Development Engagement Lab surveyed people in January 2023, 41% of respondents shared the belief that ‘development aid helps to reduce the number of refugees who come to us’ (Morini, 2023). A survey among German decision-makers on development aid,<sup>22</sup> conducted in early 2021, confirmed the finding. Every member of parliament who participated in that survey felt that development was about reducing the number of refugees coming to Germany and confirmed that refugees and migration were the number one issue raised by and discussed with their constituents (Oh et al., 2021).

### 5.2.2 Consenting recipients and alignment with political interests

Another success factor for a narrative is the degree to which recipients are predisposed to agreement. Research shows that narratives are picked up when they relate to a recipient’s own pre-existing cognitive frames, beliefs, attitudes and interests (Dennison, 2021; see also Wehling, 2016; Cairney and Oliver, 2017; El Ouassil and Karig, 2021; Cullerton et al., 2022; Saez and Bryant, 2023).

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22 85 responses were given by parliamentarians, their staffers and BMZ officials.

The narrative of stemming migration worked because it served the interests of different groups. Chancellor Merkel wanted to be able to maintain her principled approach to providing refuge to people having to flee violence, at the same time needing to show that she was also working on the root causes of displacement to shield Germany from future massive influxes. The narrative around providing humanitarian assistance to refugees in Syria's neighbouring countries offered her a way out of the migration dead end that she found herself in. Hence, the presumed linkage between providing humanitarian assistance and stemming migration was established at the highest level of German politics. One interlocutor expressed the opinion that only a conservative chancellor was able to put humanitarian assistance so high on the agenda as there was no suspicion of her doing it for ideological reasons.

Beyond the chancellery, different parties took up the narrative in parliament. More progressive and left-leaning politicians wanted to emphasise that increased assistance and improved living conditions and livelihood options would give people the choice to remain in their home countries. More conservative politicians wanted to show their constituency that they were effectively keeping people away. Hence different political actors could place very different political agendas within the same overarching narrative. This is one of the reasons why this narrative was so successful: it allowed different political parties to use it as a frame for their political interests and talking to their constituencies. One key interviewee summarised this:

The beauty of this narrative was that you could serve both. Those who say that we have to protect the homeland here, better [to send aid] there than [host them] here. But there were also those who said, foreign policy must be measured against human rights, what is good for the people. So, you could actually do justice to both of them and that's why one side was convinced and the other somehow went along with it.

### 5.2.3 The need for a narrative on how to stop the influx of refugees

A third factor for success lies in the context. Narratives are likely to emerge when they are needed due to the salience of an emerging issue or high levels of uncertainty or complexity. The analysis of media articles from 2011 to 2021 shows that the narrative of aid stemming migration appeared seldom during the early years of 2011–2014 because there was no need for it. However, this changed dramatically with the sudden arrival and then continuous influx of refugees to Europe's and Germany's borders. It became the dominating subject in the media, and the perceived loss of control by the state over who enters its borders became a hotly debated topic. Policymakers were forced to justify to the public and media how their actions were dealing with the situation and thus this narrative was a very helpful tool (Dennison, 2021).

In the face of uncertainty and complexity, a narrative is not only a description of a crisis but part of the coping mechanism as well. Collective narratives provide an opportunity to resolve a crisis (Breithaupt, 2023). Those actors who pick up the narratives turn from passive recipients into active subjects. This shift from passive to active served not only as a solution to Chancellor Merkel's impasse with her

political opponents (Alexander, 2017) but similarly for German society as a whole. It offered reassurance for those affected by the perceived uncertainty caused by the massive influx of foreigners, and legitimacy for those acting to resolve it.

According to Breithaupt (2023: 188), the emotional shift from passive recipient to active narrator is rewarded by our brain. Through this emotional reward structure, collective narratives can serve a soothing function (Entlastungsfunktion). Due to their storytelling structure, collective narratives can provide relief because they are explanatory, integrative, and emotionally rewarding. He argues that narratives can turn around previous events and reformulate them in such a way that the crisis becomes part of a coherent sequence. The government's resolve to better fund humanitarian aid in the region implies the promise that future crises will be prevented. 'The year 2015 must not be repeated' is a firm resolution repeated regularly in German politics, predominantly by conservative politicians and members of Merkel's party.

Yet, financing humanitarian assistance was not the only action taken to reduce the number of refugees. In 2016, the EU-Türkiye agreement was published (Council of the European Union, 2016), which effectively prevented people on the move from leaving Türkiye for the EU in exchange for a financial contribution of €3 billion, a large part of which was paid as humanitarian assistance. Aid organisations criticised the agreement as deterrence and hindering people to claim their right to asylum.<sup>23</sup> An interviewee called it 'paid migration deterrence dressed in humanitarian narratives'. Between 2016 and 2017, following the EU-Türkiye agreement, there was a significant reduction in arrivals by sea (Knaus, 2020).

### 5.3 Countering the 'stemming migration' narrative

There were also actors who had a growing unease with the narrative and tried to counter it. Principled humanitarian actors, together with staff within GFFO, saw it as detrimental to a principled approach to humanitarian assistance. The humanitarian division within GFFO continuously insisted that tackling migration (Fluchtursachenbekämpfung) is *not* a motive nor justification for humanitarian assistance. First, they pointed to the fact that humanitarian assistance is provided based on needs and, secondly, they defended the legal differences between forced displacement and economic migration. Yet this was met with little to no acknowledgement within the ministry itself and the two groups – forcibly displaced people and economic migrants – were increasingly conflated into one category of 'people on the move, regardless of the reason' (key informant).<sup>24</sup>

Some actors tried to promote a counternarrative that the humanitarian objective was to offer people a *choice* to stay closer to home by investing in support structures in the region, rather than the political objective of keeping people in neighbouring countries. But this did not gain much traction. And as aid

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23 For example, MSF announced in a press release that it would no longer take funds from EU member states or EU institutions as a result of the deterrence policies.

24 A newly created, and frequently used, abbreviation in the ministerial bureaucracy – FluMi (shorthand for *Flucht und Migration*, or 'flight and migration') – evidenced this conflation well.

organisations were benefactors of the substantial increases in humanitarian funding made possible by the widespread use of the narrative within political decision-making, many instead rode the wave and had little incentive to actively counter it.

### 5.4 The success and legacy of the stemming migration narrative on decision-making

The narrative of preventing flight and stemming migration has been identified as having had the most direct impact on budgetary decisions and there is a direct link between it and the then single largest contribution that WFP had ever received (WFP, 2017). The narrative around rationing food distributions seemed to have struck such a chord that it was WFP, not UNHCR, that was the largest receiver of humanitarian funding at the time, despite the nature of the crisis as one pertaining to refugee response.

It was the only narrative identified by the study that in and of itself was sufficient to lead to an unprecedented budgetary increase. It derived its influence from an overlap of domestic interests and foreign policy objectives. Exploiting these overlapping interests created the political will to bring about change, namely increasing the humanitarian aid budget for Syria and the region. Furthermore, the detailed analysis showed that the narrative was particularly successful because it was plausible, it was repeated, and because it served a purpose for a range of actors including government, opposition politicians, the wider public, and aid organisations.

Another indicator of its impact was the fact that in 2017, all political parties' election programmes, but especially the Greens and Social Democrats, made reference to fighting the causes of flight and migration (*Fluchtursachenbekämpfen*) as a political objective. Following the election, which saw a grand coalition of the conservatives (CDU/CSU) and social democrats (SPD), their 2017 coalition agreement sets out that in order to mitigate causes of displacement and migration, more funding for development cooperation was needed. This objective was underlined during budget negotiations for 2017, giving over €1.1 billion for humanitarian assistance and preventing causes of displacement/migration. Of this funding, €630 million went to humanitarian assistance in GFFO and €550 million to BMZ for preventing causes of displacement (ZEIT Online, 2016). Within BMZ, a special budget line was renamed 'preventing causes of displacement and migration, integration of refugees'.

One article dubs BMZ the new 'Ministry of Preventing Causes of Migration and Displacement' (*Fluchtursachenbekämpfungsmministerium*) (Kanning, 2017). Yet, moving forward, despite being continuously used (see, for example, Dawi, 2023), the narrative on stemming migration seems to be losing traction and efficacy. A government representative said, 'You cannot keep playing the same card, the topic is over'. There is an acknowledgement among some that the same narrative may not lead to the gains in humanitarian budget that were seen in 2016 and 2017.



## 6 Conclusions

As the previous chapters have outlined, the narratives used in relation to humanitarian aid – whether related to its justification, its use as a foreign policy tool or as a perceived way to prevent flight and stem migration – did influence decision-making regarding the German humanitarian aid budget. However, the influence varies from narrative to narrative, and it is difficult to attribute causality or correlation to a singular element. In addition, important contextual factors served as accelerators; a factor which must not be overlooked in particular was the economic situation that allowed for excess government resources to increase the humanitarian budget. It was also significant that a conservative chancellor was in office and was advocating for a stronger humanitarian response, which stifled any potential backlash from fellow conservatives. Lastly, there was the media's role in affecting public opinion, as outlets offered a rather uncritical stance when reporting on large-scale (mostly natural) disasters.

That said, it was the narrative of humanity and solidarity with victims of disasters that provided the solid foundation upon which the arguments for a larger humanitarian aid budget could be built. Whilst it was identified as an important conducive factor, the narrative alone was insufficient to set in motion a significant budget increase; instead it needed additional igniting factors to take effect. One such factor was the move away from 'cheque book diplomacy' towards a new understanding of Germany's role in the world, summarised as 'foreign policy with means', which led to a gradual shift towards foreign policy approaches using a set of soft-power instruments, of which humanitarian assistance was identified as an increasingly important one. The policy shift needed resources to be put into practice and humanitarian assistance was found to be a professional and effective conduit for those resources. Increased funding for and political engagement in humanitarian action thus somewhat capitalised on these wider policy shifts. The identified 'second-largest donor' and associated narrative of the 'payer or player' was an effect of the budget increase rather than a cause of it. Yet the narratives proved to be a useful measuring stick for maintaining the funding levels in subsequent years.

Instead, it was the narrative of preventing flight and stemming migration that has been identified as being the most influential in budgetary negotiations regarding the humanitarian assistance budget. The following section explores some of the implications of this finding.

### 6.1 Does the end justify the means?

The narrative of aid preventing flight and stemming migration was found to be the most successful in 'opening the wallet faster – we need to be upfront about that' (key interviewee). Despite it being simplistic and inaccurate from technical and research perspectives, the narrative had – and continues to have – a lot of traction, even if there is now greater reflection on the truth behind the narrative and a lower likelihood that it will lead to an increase in funding. The positive result was a dramatic increase in funding. The downside of this was the opportunistic use of this narrative, including by aid organisations as it served their financial interests, resulting in a lack of pushback against the narrative.

Is the humanitarian community prepared to take advantage of more utilitarian narratives even if they are proven to be technically wrong and support values that are incongruent with humanitarian principles? Does the end justify the means?

Interviewees saw various shades of grey regarding whether this narrative crossed a line. One interviewee called it ‘deception/betrayal of the population’ to suggest that aid can mitigate the root causes of migration. Some argued that the end justified the means because the additional budget acquired was ultimately meant to be spent in line with humanitarian principles and not, for example, to hinder migrants from moving or to finance border management. Others cautioned that there is a downside to using an extremely simplified narrative built on the interplay of values and interests: if the interest fades away – e.g. if there are no more refugees coming or a crisis occurs in a region from where people flee to other countries but not Europe – the argument threatens to collapse, making it much more difficult to go back to the purely altruistic reasoning. Thus, arguably, the long-term damage could be greater than the short-term benefit.

Did the use of this narrative open Pandora’s box? In hindsight most interviewees from humanitarian organisations distanced themselves from the ‘stemming migration’ narrative or strove to explain that their organisation had not promoted it. However, there was clearly an instrumentalisation by key actors that had an interest in utilising that narrative. As one key informant put it, ‘We have deliberately used public pressure to generate movement. If donors are not willing to help out of altruistic reasons, then we need to tell them there are certain “advantages” that come with it that are also of (domestic) political interest to them.’ This approach, however, risks that only those people who have a realistic chance of reaching Europe’s borders will receive assistance, rather than assistance being based on need or going to the victims of forgotten crises. In the concrete case of Germany, the risk has not materialised. Preliminary research by CHA (Südhoff and Hövelmann, 2019) shows that German funding has been invested mostly in a principled way and did not come at the expense of other humanitarian emergencies.

This shows that capitalising on narratives that serve domestic or foreign policy interests of donor states can be a legitimate instrument<sup>25</sup> and in this concrete case it did not mean that Germany became a primarily interest-led humanitarian donor. But the interest-led narrative of stemming migration may not have developed its worst effects in Germany because of the institutional set-up. Having two ministries in charge of different parts of international assistance allowed for a division of labour: BMZ embraced the narrative as an instrument to access federal budget resources and picked up the policy engagement of preventing flight and stemming migration with its new special initiative on addressing root causes of migration. A key informant confirmed: ‘BMZ has always used migration control as an argument because it is cheaper and more sensible to create opportunities to stay. And that is legitimate. What is not

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25 At an event, Acting Director General for the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) supported capitalising on domestic or foreign policy interest-led narratives, as long as humanitarian funds are spent in a principled way (Egmont Institute, 2023).

legitimate is to link aid directly to it.' GFFO on the other hand was able – and was seen by interviewees – to be cautious in overtly utilising the narrative, particularly true for staff members in the humanitarian divisions, returning to needs-based arguments instead.

### **6.2 Lessons learned from Germany for other countries**

For other countries seeking to increase their humanitarian aid spending like Germany, there are several important lessons. Evidence alone on the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance is not always sufficient to create change. It needs to be complemented by professional and intentional storytelling. These narratives should employ the success factors of plausibility, repetition and simplicity, and recognise the political interests of the intended audience.

GFFO humanitarian staff, along with their UN and NGO partners, constantly repeated the key messages around humanitarian principles, the international humanitarian system, its professional approach to assisting people in need, and its ability to deliver. This was a successful key alliance, especially during the early years of the studied period – but it has lost some momentum more recently, according to key informants. Ensuring there is engagement and alignment between the range of humanitarian stakeholders is important for generating political will.

In summary, where aid is presented through narratives as being in the national interest – in the case of Germany, for stemming migration – and where there is a collective buy-in from relevant stakeholders, this can present a powerful enabling environment for significant shifts in aid.

## 7 Recommendations and ways forward

The research demonstrates that there is potential to understand how and why some humanitarian policy narratives gain traction.

For humanitarians wishing to maintain the current high levels of aid provided by Germany, the ongoing discussions about the upcoming budget for the year 2024 and beyond show the importance of the need to maximise the advocacy efforts. For the first time, it now has to withstand a ‘stress test’. The indicative planning for 2024 foresees major reductions in GFFO’s budget lines – up to 37%, if parliament accepts the draft budget tabled by the Ministry of Finance. Given Germany’s important position among the top donors, such a cut would severely deteriorate the already existing sufficiency challenges explained at the beginning of this paper, especially as they would come on top of other donors’ cuts, e.g. those of the US, UK and Sweden.

All concerned actors should thus conduct concerted efforts to prevent this from happening. As the lessons learned from this paper show, simply relying on the moral argument alone will be insufficient to counter fiscal tightening, in Germany and beyond. Actors need to reflect more strategically on how to future-proof humanitarian budgets by stepping up their game with regards to the story they tell about the need for – and the impact of – humanitarian aid.

Context has proven to matter significantly in this regard. Humanitarian actors need to make sure they develop narratives taking into account the broader public debate on government expenditure, understand the influencing factors as well as the inner ways of working of the specific government. The way the media in a country reports on and thinks about aid is also a decisive contextual factor.

Learnings from cognitive science should also be applied, as laid out in the analysis of why the ‘preventing flight and stemming migration’ narrative flourished so well. Some of the success factors such as plausibility, credibility of the narrator, simplicity and repetition can, to an extent, be utilised by humanitarian actors and thus be made to work in their favour. Others, such as having a receptive audience, ensuring that there are existing interests to tap into, and there being a contextual need to make sense of an issue, are more difficult to influence.

## 7.1 Maximising the use of success factors that humanitarian actors can control

### On plausibility and coherence:

- A plausible and coherent narrative is more likely to yield positive effects. Humanitarian actors should therefore invest in collecting evidence on the impact and effectiveness of humanitarian assistance. This should include continual highlighting of humanitarian needs and why and where they increase, but also communicating emerging best practice on ways of reducing needs such as anticipatory action, or ways of reducing costs, such as digital innovations.
- Bringing concrete examples of effective humanitarian assistance or policy impact into parliamentary debates was considered successful for influencing policy debates. For Germany, the anticipatory action policy priority was a ‘hit’ among MPs once they better understood how it worked. ‘Humanitarian VIPs’, such as the heads of UN agencies or other large aid organisations represent well-respected and trusted voices, and are useful to bring across messages to political decision-makers, something that could work well also in smaller or aspiring donor states.

### On the credibility of the narrator:

- Aid organisations should increase transparency and admit to shortcomings in the way that aid money is used and what efforts are and could be taken to address inefficiency in the aid sector. Such self-critical awareness of challenges also allows for better accountability among key humanitarian actors, e.g. government representatives in charge of allocating humanitarian budgets and whether they practise the needs-based allocation principle that they preach.
- Aid organisations should also remain transparent with regards to their own interests, such as fundraising opportunities, in order not to jeopardise their credibility.

### On simplicity and repetition:

- Governmental and non-governmental humanitarian actors alike need to invest in more professional capacity and resources to transmit the essence of humanitarian aid – supporting people affected by a disaster or a crisis in their own efforts to overcome the worst effects of the disaster and to regain a dignified living situation. Communication professionals need to find ways to simplify the message without falling into the trap of portraying affected people as helpless victims waiting for a (white) saviour to rescue them.
- Repetition will be made easier if humanitarian stakeholders forge alliances, tap into a country’s civil society and build on the positive reputation of organisations amongst the population. Being associated with these actors allows humanitarians to capitalise on the trust of others and inform a broader audience on the value of humanitarian assistance.

## 7.2 Managing success factors beyond humanitarian actors' control

### On existing interests and maximising opportunities:

- It is important to be able to capitalise on existing interests of the audience – while generating those interests is beyond the ability of humanitarian organisations, humanitarians must be aware of new opportunities to influence.
- Having narratives 'ready to use' when a window of opportunity opens up is critical. This could be a large-scale, sudden-onset disaster that raises media attention and allows humanitarian actors to place the collected evidence, packaged in a simple and well-understood story, into the public conscious. Being ready to react to negative narratives as they surface, which may question the effectiveness or taint the reputation of humanitarian assistance, is also essential. Actively countering sentiments such as 'it doesn't matter how much money you put into the humanitarian system, it is never enough', is critical to maintaining public support for humanitarian aid.
- Such an event or other occurrences, including negative ones such as a coup d'état, can draw the attention of politicians on situations in crisis-affected countries, even if only for a short while. Humanitarian actors can aim to piggy-back with their messaging, capitalising on the need to make sense of such an event by highlighting how root causes for such events link with unmet needs, and how effective humanitarian assistance can contribute to reducing the suffering caused, thus building on the desire of the audience to see action taken and relief being provided.
- The interests of additional governments would have to be met to widen the donor base for humanitarian action. But this alone is not enough. To gain more trust, support and financial buy-in from non-EU or non-Western actors, it is crucial to open the 'humanitarian club' and advance towards a truly globally inclusive humanitarian system by diversifying and restructuring boards and committees to reflect global representation, visibility and the opinions of those hesitant to join.
- As the analysis in Section 6.2 has shown, tapping into political interests is an option but also a slippery slope. This strategy offers short-term opportunities for fundraising but the long-term pain might put the short-term gain into question. If humanitarian actors decide to build their narratives on such interests, these efforts have potential to lead to action and open wallets. However, actors need to be sure that they remain principled in their operations and ensure that firewalls against political manipulation of the allocated budgets stay strong. This will also include an honest discussion within an organisation, especially between fundraising staff and programme staff, where to draw the red line. Such discussions need to be held before the next crisis hits and overwhelming urgency prohibits sensitive discussions.

The dependence of humanitarian organisations on discretionary (government) funding means that there can be arguments for constructing – and a temptation to construct – narratives that play into the political interests of donors. But when they do so, they have to be careful and should reflect on their responsibility to uphold global norms and principles, such as providing aid according to need and nothing else.

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**Humanitarian Policy Group**

ODI  
203 Blackfriars Road  
London SE1 8NJ  
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7922 0300  
Fax: +44 (0) 20 7922 0399  
Email: [hpgadmin@odi.org](mailto:hpgadmin@odi.org)  
Website: [odi.org/hpg](http://odi.org/hpg)

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